

FASTEST THAT THE FASTEST PONY
by
General Charles King
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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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DRAWN BY W. F. STECHER



SUNDAY morning, June 25, 1876,—the centennial year,—broke brilliant and cloudless over the Bighorn Range and all the adjacent Indian hunting-grounds. If ever the heavens spoke of peace and good-will toward men, it was here and on this perfect day.

Away to the east, along the Atlantic seaboard, the church-bells were calling to early worship. Here, half-way across the continent, with Cloud Peak towering, a dazzling white sentinel, over miles upon miles of glorious landscape, there reigned impressive, Sabbath silence.

It was barely five o'clock—"mountain time." It was still deep shadow among the cottonwoods in the winding ravine, where a dozen brown-faced, bearded men stood eagerly watching the movements of two of their number, who, following a half-breed scout, were slowly, cautiously nearing the crest of the eastward ridge. The arms and accoutrements, not the dress, the saddled horses grouped in the shelter of the sandy stream-bed and guarded by other dozens, told that here was a scouting party of United States cavalry. The fact that not a whiff of camp-fire smoke could be seen, although the night had been spent here in bivouac, told that they were in the heart of the savage enemy's country, where the faintest error would betray them.

When one young trooper broke into a nervous, chuckling laugh, the lieutenant left in command turned sharply upon him, with the order, low and stern:

"Shut up, there!"

Men use terse language on an Indian campaign.

Presently the half-breed reached a point whence he could see the wide-spreading country beyond the ridge, and lay there prone. Then the two followers crept up on line with him, and, bareheaded, unsling their field-glasses. Then from a swale, or hollow, midway, there suddenly appeared a little line of slouch-hats and flannel-shirted backs, as a supporting squad of troopers ran forward a dozen rods or so, then as suddenly halted, knelt and waited.

And then, without removing the glass from his eyes, the elder of the two officers, after long survey, drawled in disgust:

"Not a blessed thing in sight!"

But the younger, laying a hand on his senior's arm, then pointing far to the southeast, answered:

"And yet we've found it!"

"It" was the broad trail from the Red Cloud Reservation, near the southeast corner of Wyoming, along which, by hundreds, the young braves of the Oglalla, Brulé and Minneconjou hands had for weeks been flocking to the support of crafty old Sitting Bull in the far northwest. And "it" was what a veteran cavalry regiment had been called up from Kansas and sent by General Sheridan to find. When they had found "it" they were to "break up the business." Other veteran regiments under General Crook were hunting for Sitting Bull along the northeast base of the Bighorn, others still, under General Terry, were marching to hem him in from the northeast, and yet

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another column, under General Gibbon, was closing in from the west.

It was a powerful combination in point of numbers. It might have succeeded—but for one fatal move.

"Well, there'll be no more joining S. B. by this route," said the younger officer, turning and pointing straight to the south, where, long miles away, a dust-cloud was rising over the divides and ravines. "Yonder comes the regiment!"

"I know," was the answer, as the elder turned and gazed thoughtfully away northward over intervening miles of silence to where the wooded crests of the Cheetish barred the horizon, "but I wish we knew what was going on up there—to-day."

Not until nearly fourteen days thereafter did we know, when, with his face pale with grief, our chief scout and trusted friend, "Buffalo Bill," startled the drowsy camp with the direful news—"Custer and half the Seventh Cavalry wiped out."

For that beautiful, peaceful Sabbath was the fatal day—and Custer's the fatal move.

All the nation knows the story now, although not until the morning of July 5th was it flashed by wire all over the land. In profound ignorance of what had happened were the government, the press, the heretofore sisterhood at Fort Lincoln, praying for the safety of loved ones who had been stripped, scalped, mutilated long days before.

Not until the *Far West*, her decks laden with wounded, reached Bismarck at dawn of the 5th, had an inkling of the truth reached the people of the States.

Yet as far east as St. Paul and Minneapolis the Indians knew, and one old Mendota Sioux had told his staunch friend, the adjutant at Fort Snelling, who for the first time declared his informant a dreamer—or a liar. He was stunned three days later to find it all true. The marvelous system of signals by which the Indians rushed important tidings—sun flashes or smokes by day and fires by night—had done it all.

The incident is recorded and vouched for in the army text-book, Colonel Wagner's "Service of Security and Information." But here is Colonel Rodman's own story of the affair, told me first long years ago, and

repeated in writing for me only a few months before his lamented death.

"Blind" was the pathetic name the old Indian bore, and blind he was, and for that reason, perhaps, more dependent than his fellows upon paleface friendship. They lived at Mendota, a large band of Sioux, peaceable since the lesson given them in 1862, but doubtless sympathetic with their savage tribesmen on

DRAWN BY H. C. EDWARDS



"BLIND" BURST IMPETUOUSLY INTO HIS TALE.

the far frontier. Blind had learned that food and kindness and welcome ever awaited him over at the fort.

Blind had gradually attached himself especially to the adjutant, and from having been first led to the adjutant's quarters, had taken to groping his way thither, unled, unhindered, yet ever made welcome. Time and again did Rodman find the grateful Indian squatting in a certain corner of the little army parlor, patiently awaiting the coming of his friend and the cheery greeting, "How, Kolah!" Rodman

had even learned to talk a little in the Sioux tongue, and to supplement this with some practise in their wonderful sign-language.

This day, Monday, July 3d, he had not thought of Blind's coming, for only two days before he had seen him safely across to the south shore of the Minnesota,—the St. Peter of territorial days,—and with him went a stout bag of bread, beef and coffee, and sugar in abundance, enough to keep the old fellow in comfort until mid-week. Yet here he was again, and two hours earlier than usual, and what was odd indeed in any Indian, quivering from intense excitement.

Rodman's first thought was that Blind had met foul play—had been robbed of his treasures. But Indians do not rob their own people. They have not yet achieved all the customs of civilization. Before the adjutant could question, the old son of a Sioux chieftain startled him with his abrupt announcement.

Speaking hurriedly, dramatically, in his native tongue, using as far as possible only those words he knew his friend could understand, but accompanying every other with an expressive sign, Blind burst impetuously into his tale:

"Heap hattle—heap Sioux—heap soldiers—heap many sleeps [nights between marching days] up Elk River [the Sioux name for the Yellowstone] and Greasy Grass [the Little Bighorn]—fight two days—heap soldiers—plenty white chiefs killed. Indians all know. Indians dancing, singing now [pointing to where Mendota lay, perhaps two miles straightaway south]. More soldiers going—more hattle soon—any day!" And here he ceased, fairly shaking from emotion.

Now an officer of Rodman's own regiment had gone with Terry's column, commanding two field-pieces, yet such was Rodman's incredulity that he thought only of how to soothe the old Indian. This took all his persuasive powers, for Blind made it clear that he feared there would be an outbreak among his fellows at Mendota; whereat Rodman only smiled, and finally sent him home.

But on the awful morning of Wednesday, when the telegraph broke the news, and the "extras" down from Minneapolis and up from St. Paul later gave the official details of the tragic death of so many well-known and beloved comrades,—the army was smaller, then,—old Blind was sent for and told to repeat his story, and then asked this question:

"How on earth could all this have reached you Indians at Mendota forty-eight hours before the telegraph could tell us?"

And Blind answered, "Indians have no lightning string. Indians use Indian runner, mirror flash, fire arrow—fire and smoke. Indian tell that story faster than the fastest pony."

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As she moved upward on the tower, she could feel it swaying in the wind; but she

controlled by a wire connected with a lever at the ground. By pulling the lever, it should have been possible to cramp the spring so as to let the wheel swing round flat against the side of the fan and stop. But the wire had broken loose, and Jennie saw that somehow she must manage to get the spring cramped without any lever, and tie the fan and wheel fast together. As it would never do to touch the wheel while it was going so fast, she would have to try to move the fan until the wheel ceased to present a broadside to the wind.

Instinctively she threw one foot round the slanting tower post, and braced it in the angle. Then, clasping the post with an arm, she managed to steady herself and have her hands free for work. Hardly knowing what she hoped to accomplish thereby, she uncoiled the rope and hurled the picket-pin clear over the fan. It swung beyond her reach, and she almost lost her balance in jerking it back. Again the sickening fear clutched her heart; again she conquered it.

Now she formulated a definite plan. She tied the rope to the tower about ten feet from the end and hung the short length across her arm. Grasping with both hands the braces that held the fan, she summoned all her strength and pulled it against the wind. The wheel, thus turned to leeward, at once slackened its speed, and was soon at rest. Nerving her right arm to hold the fan alone an instant, with her left she threw the end of the rope across the brace and drew it tight. Then gradually transferring her strength from the fan to the rope which bound it, she managed to tie the rope firmly to the post.

This done, she tremblingly worked her way round to the wheel, inserted a portion of the rope between some of its vanes, and securely fastened it. Returning to the fan, she passed under it and stood out in the very teeth of the wind for the next move. She threw the rope over the frame of the fan for leverage, and pulling down with all her might, succeeded in cramping the spring and drawing the wheel round behind and parallel with the fan, where she quickly made it fast.

The combined resistance of fan and wheel to the wind put a heavy strain on the weak rope that held them to the tower post, and Jennie saw with alarm that it was almost worn through. If it broke, and the fan swung round far enough, the wheel would probably strike her and sweep her from the platform. With a strength born of desperation, she gripped the braces again and awaited the shock. It came sooner than she had expected. With a jerk that almost tore her arms from their sockets, she was lifted and swung like a pendulum as fan and wheel spun round like tops with the

catch cold. She wondered why she did not hear him crying. She strained her eyes and ears, but could make out nothing at all.

Presently a dark something moved stealthily toward the door. Jennie shouted with all her might. The thing stopped as if listening, then sneaked on into the house. Jennie heard something upset, and the dark form came rushing out with a large white object in its mouth. Jennie shouted again, and again the animal stopped and listened, then went loping off toward the cañon, its white burden marking its pathway through the gathering darkness.

"O my baby! My baby!" shrieked Jennie, in impotent frenzy. Then, listening, she could hear the coyotes in the cañon snarling and fighting over the feast they were having.

A mad impulse seized her to leap from the tower, but before she could move a muscle, the darkness of unconsciousness fell upon her, like the snuffing out of a candle. She sank like a dead thing, precariously balanced on the narrow plank.

It was pitch-dark when Steve and Mike, returning from town, drove into the yard and brought the teams to a standstill with a "Whoa!" in which the note of satisfaction was only equaled by the willingness with which the command was obeyed.

"You be unhooking the teams, Mike, while I run over and start the windmill, so as they can have a fresh drink. I'll just step to the door and let the little lady know you're here, so she'll have your plate ready. I reckon she's had a time of it keepin' supper hot so long. And when you come, bring that package under the front seat—it's the blue dress-goods I got to surprise Jennie."

Going on the run, he paused long enough to slip the ring off the lever, but the mill did not start.

"Not wind enough," he said. "I s'pose it is kind o' tickered out after the exertions of the day!" he growled, good-naturedly, and came on up to his open door.

"Jennie, you little mischief, what are you sitting here in the dark for?" he called out, cheerily. "Got some kind of a surprise for me, I'll be bound. Well, don't answer, if you don't want to. I'll bet you're hiding your face in a pillow to keep from laughing. Just wait till I get this match lit, and — Great Caesar! What on earth do you reckon's happened?"

Rushing to the door, he shouted, "Mike, come here! Quick!"

Together they searched the tiny hut. The cob basket was overturned in the middle of the floor, the fire was out, and the table was bare. Jim lay asleep in his cradle, his dusty face streaked with tears. Jennie was nowhere to be found. Her skirts were thrown across a chair, and there were great streaks of blood on the floor.

Mike was the first to speak: "Get me the lantern, Steve, and I'll go and put out the teams as quick as I can, and then we'll hunt this thing down. I'll just turn on the mill. You said you'd do it, but I guess you forgot," he added, kindly.

When Mike reached the windmill he found the lever loose, but the mill was motionless. It seemed to him there was breeze enough to turn it. Looking up, he saw some one else

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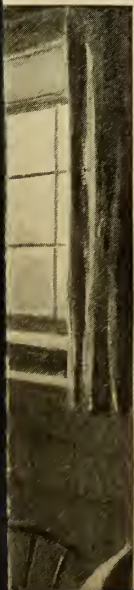
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